

Fight, Flight, or Freeze:

Allowing Rosh HaShanah to Bring us Back to Who we are Without the Fear

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The smell of fear is in the air. People quake. Men hide. Women shake. Heart beats race. Breath is short. In the Star Wars prequel, Andor, the show runners demonstrate what the Galaxy looked like BEFORE the rise of the evil Emperor Palpatine. What were the conditions that allowed him to rise to power? The answer? He counted on fear. He knew that human beings, when truly afraid, would freeze. And he was right... mostly.

In an iconic scene aired last year, the Andor cast demonstrated what it would take to resist fear, and to come back to who we could be... when we refuse to allow that fear to drive the bus. The great actress Fiona Shaw played the role of Maarva Carassi Andor. Only towards the end of her life did Maarva relinquish her fear and discover her power. She woke up.

Maarva's funeral takes place in the town square on her home planet, Ferrix. A projected hologram which she pre-recorded is played to the crowd. As they incline their heads to the sky, rapt with awe and respect, the people she has left behind listen to Maarva's final message.

She says this:

“We’ve been sleeping. We’ve had each other, and Ferrix, our work, our days. We had each other and they left us alone....

But we were sleeping. I’ve been sleeping. And I’ve been turning away from the truth I wanted not to face. There is a wound that won’t heal at the center of the galaxy. There is a darkness reaching like rust into everything around us. We let it grow, and now it’s here. It’s here and it’s not visiting anymore. It wants to stay.

Perhaps it’s too late. But I’ll tell you this, if I could do it again, I’d wake up early.”

What is the sleep Maarva is referring to? Fear. Most of us, most of the time, act and react out of place of fear. That fear brings out our primal instincts for survival: what psychologists call a flight, fight, or freeze response.

When our fear takes the wheel, we do not make deliberative decisions.
When our fear controls us, we do not create new solutions or new art.
When our fear consumes us, we do not think or ponder or grow or
breathe... we just react.

Maarva wakes up from her sleep, which is to say her fear, towards the end
of her life.

The question is, despite living in a world where we have much to be afraid
of, how might the dawning of a New Year, this New Year, wake *us* from
our slumber, and our fear? How might Rosh HaShanah give us the
strength to reclaim the wheel we once held so that we can carve a better
way forward grounded in love and understanding?

Today's world is, frankly, a mess. We have what to be afraid of. Anti-
Semitism has skyrocketed to levels never before seen. We are afraid. 48
hostages are still being held in the hellish tunnels of Gaza. We are afraid.
Members of our own synagogue have been rounded up and deported. We
are afraid. Political violence is at an all-time high. We are afraid.

And it's not just that we are afraid in a global context. So many of our personal lives give us reason to fear as well. We are afraid of the disease which is plaguing our loved one's body. We are afraid of the jobs we might lose. We are afraid of the conflict and tension in our families. We are afraid of being maligned on social media. We are afraid of how to finance a future for our children and grandchildren. Each one of us, in our own ways, has reason to fear.

Fear is natural and normal and healthy. But what happens to the brain when the fear takes over?

Last Spring I was introduced to a concept called "the polyvagal chart and the neuroception of threat vs safety." This is a theory by Dr. Steven Porges, who was the director of the Brain Body Center at the University of Illinois- Chicago. Effectively, the theory claims that the vagus nerve, the 10th cranial nerve, unconsciously responds to fear or danger by triggering either a fight, flight, or freeze reaction.

The chart itself shows three zones of body/brain states. When we are in the green zone we are socially engaged. Here we are settled, grounded, curious, and mindful. Our immunity is high, our breath is deep, oxygen is circulating to our vital organs. When we are NOT reacting to fear, but rather in control of our reactions, we are capable of incredible creativity and connection.

However, when our cranial nerves begin to sense danger, we move into a yellow zone. We may feel frustration, irritation, anger or even rage. Or, on the other hand, we may feel worry, anxiety, fear and panic. Fight and flight are two sides of the same coin. When the fear begins to take over, our reactions choose *us* instead of *us* choosing our reactions. In this state, we are beginning to spin and we are certainly not able to create deep and lasting solutions.

Finally, the theory states that when our brain perceives a life threat. This is the red zone. This is where helplessness, numbness, dissociation, and hopelessness set in. We are frozen. Our body begins to conserve metabolic resources, our eye contact decreases, and even our blood pressure begins to plummet. This is a state of extreme stress and immobility.

That's what Maarva Andor was describing. That's what she meant by being asleep. When the fear has completely consumed us, we can't even move.

Though most of us, most of the time, don't experience anything so extreme, we all know what it's like to be overwhelmed, speechless, and petrified. We know what it's like when the fear controls us, rather than us controlling the fear.

But what do we do about it? How might Rosh HaShanah be the antidote? How might the New Year aid us in climbing down from the red, settling below the yellow, and returning to our connected and engaged selves in a green zone?

In fact, Rosh HaShanah gives us the tools to do just that.

First, as Maarva Andor said, 'We need to wake up.' She might as well have been quoting from the Rambam's understanding of the Shofar.

In the Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, Moses Maimonides' Medieval law code, he explains:

“The shofar on Rosh HaShanah... hints at something, i.e., “Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep! And slumberers, arise from your slumber!”

עורו ישנים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מפרדמתכם

In other words, when we are paralyzed by the fear, the shofar wakes us up. We can be lulled into inaction. We can close our eyes to our own faults. We can forget our purpose, and forget our priorities

But the Shofar awakens us... it is meant to shake us from our immobilization and to remind us that though we cannot control what happens *to* us, we *can* control how we react.

Moreover, on Rosh HaShanah, we are told that God remembers us. Tomorrow, one of the primary motifs of the Musaf Service will be Zichronot, memories. Our ancestors understood that on the New Year, we need a reminder of who we *were*... before the fear. There was a time when we were in that green zone of creativity and connectivity. And even if we've forgotten who we are or what we are capable of, God never forgets.

The cantor will chant tomorrow, Zacharti Lach, I remember you... I remember who you used to be... long before the fear took over.

The words excerpted from the prophet Jeremiah are directed towards a weary people:

I remember you

זָכַרְתִּי לְךָ

I remember the kindness of your youth,

חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ

Your love as a bride—

אֶהְבֶּת כְּלוּלָתְךָ

How you followed Me in the wilderness,

לְכַתְּךָ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר

We were once young and gentle. We were once idealistic and in love. We were once brave adventurers. Those qualities are not lost, they are just buried... by life.

On Rosh HaShanah we are invited to leave the yellow zone of reactivity, where we have become a series of flight or fight choices, and return to our gentle green selves, the grounded and mindful versions of us that God has never forgotten.

Today, the shofar awakens us. Today, God remembers our true selves. And tomorrow, on the first day of Rosh HaShanah, we will be invited to let go of who we were in the previous year.

At 5pm at Lake Michigan, our community will gather for the ritual of Tashlich. We will toss bread crumbs into the waves, recounting where we have gone wrong. We will throw away our reactions, so that what remains will be our true essence.

So many of our worst habits are reactions to fear: we yell because we are afraid of losing control, we lie because we are afraid of being caught, we ignore those who matter most because we are afraid we might not be enough. But when we toss away those habits, we have a chance to become, once again, our very best selves.

At Tashlich, it is traditional to quote from the prophet Micah, chapter 7, verse 19. Therein he says:

God, You will return to us compassionately, overcoming the consequences of our sin, hurling our sins into the depths of the sea.

בְּמִצְּלוֹת יְיָ כָּל-חַטֹּאתֵינוּ יִשְׁוֹב יְיָ חֲמֵנוּ יִכַּפֵּר עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ וְתִשְׁלַךְ:

On Rosh HaShanah, we are reminded that we *always* have a choice. We can *always* change. We needn't react to the fear.

To be human, and to be a Jew, is to be more than a series of unconscious reactions activated by a cranial nerve. We are capable of so much more.

Who have we become when reacting to fear? Who do we wish to be in the year to come?

Tonight, Rosh HaShanah calls: 'It's time to wake up.' Tonight, Rosh HaShanah is reminding us of who we truly are. Tonight, Rosh HaShanah is beckoning us to throw our past mistakes into the depths and to choose a different future.

May we have the strength to heed that call. Shanah Tovah!